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New movie casts CIA as villain in JFK death

By Michael Kilian
Chicago Tribune

LOS ANGELES—The case of the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy is about to be reopened—not by a court or congressional investigating committee, but by a controversial new movie.

Titled "JFK" and written and directed by the iconoclastic Oscar winner Oliver Stone, it blends a number of conspiracy theories and boldly asserts that Kennedy was killed in a "coup d'etat" engineered by the CIA and Defense Department and covered up by the FBI, the Justice Department and the Dallas police—with the connivance of Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson.

It charges that Kennedy was eliminated because he had turned against American involvement in the war in Vietnam and wanted to dismantle the CIA.

The $40 million, three-hour epic is the most mammoth Hollywood assault to date on the much disputed conclusions of the Warren Commission, which found that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone and attempted to close the books on the Kennedy assassination a generation ago.

The long, preachy but powerful and compelling film, unveiled to the press at a special preview in Los Angeles over the weekend, has provoked an uproar almost from the moment Stone began shooting last spring. One columnist, without seeing the movie, called it "a threat to history."

Most criticism has been aimed at Stone's acceptance of the Kennedy conspiracy case brought against CIA-connected New Orleans business executive Clay Shaw by controversial prosecutor James Garrison, whom the movie depicts as a hero.

Opening Friday in more than 900 theaters across the nation, including several in the Chicago area, the often grisly and frightening "JFK" is expected to have enormous impact on the estimated 60 percent of the population born after 1963.

Stone, who portrayed the darker sides of the Vietnam War with his 1986 film "Platoon" and Ronald Reagan-era avarice with his 1987 "Wall Street," said he wants "JFK" to confront "the big lie" of the Warren Commission report and address for the first time "why Kennedy was killed."

To ensure the widest possible audience for "JFK," Stone enlisted a major cast of Oscar winners and big box office stars.

Kevin Costner plays prosecutor Garrison as a courageous loner opposing an evil establishment in the mode of the Frank Capra-Jimmy Stewart classic "Mr. Smith

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Goes to Washington."

Also in the huge cast are Sissy Spacek, Joe Pesci, John Candy, Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Donald Sutherland, Gary Oldman, Tommy Lee Jones, Kevin Bacon, Ed Asner, Sally Kirkland and Chicago's Laurie Metcalf—most of whom participated in the project for substantially less than their usual fees because of a commitment to Stone's revisionary crusade.

which 80% did not be drive anyway!

"I hope it blows away the Warren Commission report," Stone said in an interview with the Tribune. "We want to make people upset; make them demand all the files that have been withheld until the year 2029—the House Select Committee files, files from the FBI."

The Warren Commission, formed by President Lyndon Johnson and including then-Michigan Rep. Gerald Ford and CIA Director Allen Dulles, produced its 26-volume report in 1964. It held that Kennedy was shot by two of three bullets fired within 6.5 seconds from the sixth floor of the Texas Book Depository by Lee Harvey Oswald, whom the commission characterized as a Communist sympathizer who acted alone.

A controversial assertion was that a single "magic" bullet passed through Kennedy and then Texas Gov. John Connally, changing direction numerous times and causing substantial, multiple wounds, although it was recovered in pristine shape from a stretcher used to carry Connally.

That and other inconsistencies subsequently raised doubts and gave birth to a plethora of conspiracy theories. Among the suspicions raised were that other shots were fired from a grassy knoll in front of the motorcade.

Stone's film also dwells onthe more than dozen witnesses or figures implicated in the conspiracy theories who died prematurely or under mysterious circumstances.

Stone was inspired to do the movie by Garrison's 1988 book, "On the Trail of the Assassins." concluded that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy" and that two or more gunmen likely were involved. It was also critical of the FBI's, CIA's and Justice Department's handling of the case.

A Gallup Poll commissioned this year by the filmmaker found that 73 percent of Americans interviewed nationwide doubt the Warren Commission "lone gunman" version of the event, Stone said.

Filmed on location in Dallas, New Orleans and Washington, "JFK" uses horrifying footage of Kennedy's dead body and other actual film clips of assassination events to make its points. "Impressive" was a typical reaction of critics who saw it at a preview Saturday night.

No government official or member of the Kennedy family has commented on the movie. While still in production, the film was the subject of cover stories in Life and Esquire and was condemned in opinion pieces published by the Tribune, the New Orleans Times-Picayune, Time and the Washington Post. The Post's George Lardner, who covered the assassination investigation, last May wrote a scathing denunciation of the film project, calling Garrison's probe "zany" and a "fraud" and said Stone was "chasing fiction."

In a response published by the Post, Stone disputed Lardner's assertions of fact and said the script Lardner and others used as the basis for their criticism was a first draft (of six) and had been stolen from the Warner Brothers offices in Hollywood.

Stone admits he is mixing some fiction with fact in his film, but only to create a dramatic vehicle for making his argument. He said he used not only Garrison's book and trial transcripts but the Jim Marrs conspiracy book "Crossfire: The Plot that Killed Kennedy," plus other research conducted in years after the Shaw trial.

"I wanted the movie to incorporate all the research that went on," he said. "My character in the movie, Jim Garrison, is really a vehicle."

Stone, who has visited the editorial boards of five major newspapers to plead the case for his movie, said he was stunned by all the adverse reaction to the project before the film was even finished.

"I feel an artist has as much right and duty to interpret history as anyone," he said. "One could agree that maybe history is too dangerous to be left to the newsmen in this case."